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## **Old Wine In New Wine Skin: The Utilization of Traditional And Modern Media in Communicating Medical and Health Reports to Rural Dwellers in Africa**

### **Introduction**

A litany of factors can be identified as responsible for the dysfunction of mass media in the process community development in Africa. Other factors include poor audience reception, lack of feedback, poor timing of modernization and development projects, irrelevant media content and the use of ineffective channel in disseminating information on development. Further, rural dwellers are neither in touch with communication policy makers nor with the urban centers where policies for community development are made. More important, however, is the fact that minuscule effort has been made to weave in cultural variables into the communication policy designed as part of development efforts.

Too many times, modern electronic media have been used to diffuse medical, health and other types of information to people who are traditional and may for a long time to come remain so. As such, these people can neither relate to the modern media nor identify the media content with their own traditional values and concepts. This is why this study argues that traditional or folk media should no longer be ignored in the efforts to utilize the media in rural development in Africa.

**Objective:** The main objective of this paper is to critically analyze the use of traditional and modern media of communication in disseminating information - in particular, medical and health news - to rural dwellers in Africa.

**Significance:** This study is important because it will enable community development planners to further understand the nature and process of communication channels that can be utilized to achieve greater success in community development projects in Africa. The study is also valuable because its recommendations can have implications for national communication policies in the African continent. Furthermore, by examining the use of traditional media of communication and modern media in community development, the study will highlight the value of folk which have been largely ignored by communication policy makers in Africa. Beyond that, this study is important because it will enrich our knowledge about the communication patterns of rural dwellers in Africa.

**Procedure:** To achieve its purpose, this paper will first define the term, development. This will be followed by a review of related literature on the role of the media in community development in order to contextualize our argument for the use of traditional and modern media in communicating development news to rural dwellers in Africa. Next, the paper describes traditional (folk) media of communication in Africa so that the term, traditional media, can be understood when used in this paper. This will be followed by a critical analysis of the place of integrating folk media with modern media in disseminating development news, particularly, medical and health information. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy implementation.

### **The Concept of Development**

The term, development, has been interchangeably used with modernization. But scholars of social change distinguish between modernization - the overall social improvement of the individual in a society - and development, the improvement of the overall material well-being of people in a given society.

At first, development was thought to be based on application of the Darwinian theory of evolutionary change. In this respect, Schramm noted that: "Not only was change in one sphere able to stimulate change in other. In other words, the process seemed relatively irreversible. Once the necessary conditions were established for take-off a country took off, became modern and stayed modern."

It was also thought that development meant looking like or resembling industrialized Western nations. Fies, for examples, notes that: 'It was generally assumed that a nation became truly modern and developed when it arrived at that point where it closely resembled Western industrial nations in terms of political and economic behaviour and institutions, attitudes toward technology and innovation, and social and psychic mobility.' This notion of the concept of development was what guided the intellectual thinking of the dominant paradigm for development between the late 1950s and 1960s. Rogers remarked that economic growth, industrialization and accompanying urbanization were essential ingredients for a country to be developed. For development to be quickened, according to Rogers, planning should be centralized and controlled by economists and financiers. This notion was also articulated by Lerner, Schramm and proponents of the dominant paradigm.

However, scholars of the paradigm have back-pedaled on that theory of development, and also redefined the concept of development. For example, Rogers says development involves popular participation, in the planning and execution of programs aimed at change; self-reliance and independence; reliance on local resources and intergration of traditional and modern values, such as the use of both acupuncture and antibiotics of Chinese medicine. According to Rogers, development is the process whereby people whereby people get to control their own destinies. He says development is a widely participatory process of social change and material advancement (including greater equality, freedom and other valued qualities) for the majority of people through their gaining greater control over their environment. Stevenson says this means that an element of development is independence from the West.

Inayatullah defines development as 'change toward patterns of society that allows better realization of human values, that allows society greater control over its environments, and over its own political destiny and that enables its individuals to gain increased control over themselves.' Third World countries define development in terms of cultural sovereignty, independence from existing global systems and a sense of nationhood.

We define development in this paper as the process of improving through mass participation, the overall social, eco-



nomic, political and cultural well-being of people of a given society, using and relying mostly on locally available human and material resources.

### Literature Review

Research on the role of communication in development started in the early 1950s with the efforts of Damle, Hirabayashi and Khatib; but major efforts to examine the role of communication in community development began in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with the publication of Lerner's book, *The Passing of a Traditional Society*. Lerner fired the imagination of the academic community with his work which identified participation in mass media as an important element in community development. Other studies followed in the 1960s with the formulation of the dominant paradigm by Rao, Rogers, Schramm, Lerner, and the UNESCO etc.

Since then, study after study has identified a litany of ways media can be utilized to diffuse innovative ideas, and to disseminate information on modernization and national development. They include the works of Schramm, Bordenave, Golding, Sinha, Chu, Haule, Bofo, Melkote, and Moemeka, to mention but a few. Research studies on the role of the mass media in national development generally contend that a critical role of the mass media is to establish a sound and stable political framework in which a proper and congenial social environment is created that in turn promotes the expansion of other sectors of national development.

Schramm, for example, noted that the media can widen horizon i.e. the media can take a person to a hill and show him or her the world and people (s) the individual has never met. In this way, Schramm contends, the media are a liberating force because they can break the bounds of distance and isolation and transport people from a traditional to *'The Great Society'*. Lerner points out that mass media can help create *'empathy'* and *'psychic mobility'* which he said, are fundamental to the people of a community who want to develop or modernize.

A number of scholars, including Nwosu, Edeani, Ascroft and Brody, Hornik, Rampal, Dissanayake, and Dube, and others, contend that the media can play a significant role in socio-economic development. About the role of the media in na-

tional development, Righter said: "At the national level, policy-makers in a number of countries are already seeking to ensure that the press is used for the general good (as governments perceive it) - as a tool for mobilizing the masses for development and the task of nation-building."

This point is also articulated by Lauer and Pye whose works underscore the role of the media in nation-building. Lauer and Pye contend the media can play an important role in national integration, national unity, national image credibility, modernization of traditional agriculture and social habits. In particular, Pye analyzes the role of the media in political mobilization and political participation as well as in building democracy. Of the role of the media in political development, Pye said:

The communication process thus gives form and structure to the political process by surrounding the politicians on the one hand with the constant reminder that political acts have consequences and that people can have insatiable expectations of politics, and on the other side with the warning that illusions of omnipotence are always dangerous, even among people who have a casual understanding of causality.

The role of the media in nationalist movements that led to political changes in Ghana and Zambia have been analyzed by Ekwelie and Kasoma respectively. Others, including Ogunade, Hyde, Idemili, Coleman, Hacten, Okonkwo, Omu and McKintosh who examined the role of the press in political development in Nigeria, concluded that the media played a major part in the events that led to that West African country's independence in 1960. Abuoga and Mutere also made similar findings about the role of the press in political developments in Kenya. Researchers who made the same conclusions include Barton, Ainslie, Sommerlad, and Haule.

Some scholars, including Dissayanake, Morrison, Malik, Ugboajah, and Katz have particularly highlighted the place of folk media, including folk theater in community development, while some scholars, including Osia, Sonaike and Pratt and Manheim have identified problems mitigating against the effectiveness of communication in national or community development. Ogbondah noted that institutional and extra-legal constraints placed on the African media are among the problems militating against its role in national development. Melkote and Babili noted that among other problems militating against

the role of the media in national development are: (i) the type of media messages audience is exposed to, (ii) the degree to which the audience internalizes development messages, (iii) the extent of audience's knowledge before being exposed to innovations; (iv) the receiver's how-to-know knowledge. While Pratt concluded that corruption, mismanagement and spoliation by some African leaders are among the reasons for the failure of community development programs in the continent. Ascroft identified the following problems: (a) lack of equitable system for delivering knowledge and skills, and (b) lack of cooperation of the local people in designing, planning and implementing development projects.

Even the proponents of the dominant paradigm, including Rogers who wrote about the passing of the dominant paradigm and the rise and fall of the dominant paradigm, also identify the constraints of media in development, and are offering alternative models of media linkage with national development. Stevenson noted that such linkages are difficult under the best of circumstances. Stevenson did not, however, rule out the potential of the mass media in community and national development.

### **Traditional Media: A Description**

Four stages of communication may be identified - oral-aural, script, electronic and satellite. Most of Africa is still in the first oral-aural stage, and utilizes oral media as the principal channels of communication. This is because much of the continent is an oral-aural culture. Among the most prominent traditional media used in Africa are the following:

**Folktale:** The oldest form of traditional communication, folktale is the only literary form of oral tradition that could be comparable to the Western novel. Professional story tellers such as among the Remme of Sierra Leone, Hausa and Yoruba in Nigeria, the Yao of East Africa and the Rwandeers of Central Africa, may travel from village to village to inform, educate and entertain. The age and gender of the narrator may dictate the tales, and story teller may relate a tale dealing with ordinary sacred subjects such as goods, fetishes, ancestors, the sick and sexual matters in a profane manner and sometimes too with ridicule. The story teller may utilize dramatic effect



to communicate the central theme of a story, employ numerous literary techniques used in prose narrative or use praise names as among Bantu story tellers. The climax of a story is probably seen if there is a sing or a short chorus that goes with the tale at intervals. The story ends with the revelation of an object lesson for individual listeners or the community. In some African communities, story telling houses are developed like Western film houses and female tale tellers and folk singers in some cases are sex symbols of contemporary Hollywood.

**Drums:** these may range from small hand-held to enormous barrel-size instruments made of wood and animal hides. The wood and hide determine the dignity and tonal sound attached to a drum. They are distinguished on the basis of pitch, timbre and volume, and are used to communicate information at a distance either by signaling or talking. Initiation to drum language is practiced among the Kissi in Guinea and Diolas in Guinea Bissau. Like modern media, drums are used to inform, educate and entertain.

They are used to transmit urgent messages from those who remain in the villages to those working in the fields. Drums are not only used to make public announcements to members of the community and to supernatural beings in order that the latter maintain natural order and serenity in the community, they are also used to contribute to the atmosphere of ceremonies and feasts. Among the Ibos of Nigeria, innumerable messages may be transmitted without using the human voice. They are used for important calls to worship, war, village or town meetings etc. the *Atunpani* drum is used by Ghana Broadcasting Corporation as signature tune while the *Pindo* and *kyirem* are used to announce formal meetings and mysterious events respectively. The descriptive rhythmic arrangements of the drum function in the same way as verbal narration, but with greater ubiquity.

**Gongs:** Made from pieces of metal, gongs are important media of communication in rural Africa where people live closer in their communities. The gongman also called town crier is the news purveyor for the village. He is chosen not only because of his eloquence and oratory but also his rhetorical and communicative skills and abilities. The gong is used

to disseminate information from the community's leaders. It is used also to disseminate information from various association and organisation to member of the community.

At other times, the gongman serves as a liaison officer, providing a channel by which the views of the people may be expressed to the king. He is a legendary figure, revered and respected for the credibility, authority and authenticity of his information. Like the network television news in the United States of America, the gongman's news is disseminated in the evening when most of the community returns from the fields. The exception is when there is an emergency (news break) that would require the gongman to deliver information in the day time. Gongmen are the Walter Cronkites and Peter Jennings of their communities.

**Festivals and Fairs:** Seasonal and annual festivals bring together the whole people of a village or town to celebrate events which happened in the past history of a particular community. It may be victory over an enemy in time of war or remembrance of an awful event such as famine, an attack by wild beasts, pestilence or epidemic. Thus, the people may gather in the village square, community center or market place for communal eating and drinking, dancing or athletic displaying. Festivals such as the Argungu fishing festival in Nigeria serve an entertainment function in addition to promoting tourism, the spirit of fraternity and unity.

**Puppetry:** Although puppetry is used primarily for entertainment, it also serves as a medium for communicating information. In Nigeria, Aminikpo and Kwagh-Hiri puppetry are central to the social lives of all Ikwerre and Ogoni, and Tiv communities respectively, and performance often lasts throughout the night. The visible parts of the puppet, animated small-size heads on a screen of richly-colored African print, do not only entertain, they inform and educate.

**Masquerade:** This is a masked dancer among members of an entertainment troupe. Like the folk story teller, the troupe travels from village to village, entertaining audiences with songs and dances learned and rehearsed secretly in bans. Some troupes may not, however, travel from community to community. Rather, they would entertain in the village square



where their audiences would be entertained. The masquerade is the center of attraction not only because of his garb that may be colourful or frightening but because of his styles of dances, songs and moral messages. The masquerades' message are short stories punctuated with epigrams and idiomatic expressions, ending with object lessons that the talked about for months. Some masquerade may also announce information from the chief or other community leaders. They can be important media in disseminating innovative ideas.

Other folks forms of communication include folk theater, songs, music, shouting, drama, dancing, horns, pipes, watchman's rattle, mime etc.

### **Attraction in Traditional Media**

A major attraction in traditional media is that they are credible sources of information. Some scholars have argued that development communication is successful in persuading rural dwellers when it is effect-orient, and credible. The most important thing about traditional media in Africa is that the audience has learnt to attach great significance and credibility to them, and when media are credible people tend to rely heavily on them for information.

A second advantage is that traditional media are relatively cheap and inexpensive. They are therefore the cheapest means of reaching those who cannot afford modern electronic and print media. Beyond that, folk media usage does not require literacy. Both senders and receivers of messages on folk media do not have to know how to read and write to use them. Since most of rural Africa is illiterate, these channels of communication offer the attraction of accessibility and availability to all and sundry. Traditional media are readily available to segment of the population which is impervious to the influence of modern media, namely rural dwellers; yet this is the segment of the social fabric that needs modernization.

Another advantage is that folk media have their roots in the consciousness of ruralites. Modern media are alien and elitist to rural inhabitants. Peasants identify them with the centers of power. Consequently, much of the energy expended on the use of mass media for national development fails to yield satisfactory results.

A fifth advantage is that folk media employ symbols (such as idioms) of the people that are readily intelligible to

them. Dissanayake notes that a formidable problems with which the earliest newspaper-persons in the vernacular languages of Asian countries had to deal with was the creation of sufficient ductile language capable of expressing the day-to-day news in a readable fashion.

Furthermore, traditional media demand active participation in the process of communication. They offer opportunities for rapport, discussion and immediate and direct feedback: two-way interactive communication that modern media do o always offer.

### **Folk Media, Modern Media and Development News**

The attractions of traditional media encourage us to articulate the view that they could be integrated with modern media to disseminate developmental news, especially medical and health reports to rural dwellers in Africa. Folk media can be integrated with modern media to teach rural dwellers modern hygiene, nutrition and health practices. For example, folk songs, music, group discussions and folk tales can be used on radio to disseminate health news. Whereas the professional folk story teller is seen as a credible news purveyor among rural dwellers, he or she could be used on a radio health magazine program to convey information on safe sex practices. The professional folk story teller may, for example, utilize a dramatic effect on radio or employ several literary techniques used in prose narratives to disseminate information on the symptoms of the Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS): how it is transmitted, its effects and consequences for society and victims.

Africans generally believe that AIDS/HIV is a sickness confined to Europe and North America. They also believe that it is an ill-health or urban residents. Modern channels such as television may not be as effective as folk media in combating these erroneous notions about the deadly disease. This is because modern channels of communication are not only expensive but they are seen by rural dwellers as European and urban media. Folk media are regarded as credible. They are also germane to rural cultures, and would therefore be more effective in countering rural dwellers' misunderstandings about the deadly AIDS disease. In view of their limited acous-

tic range, folk media should be integrated with modern media to disseminate information about AIDS/HIC to Africa's rural masses.

The story teller could use his or her rhetorical skills on a radio program to tell a story that would have a moral ending or object lesson about the devastating effects of AIDS/HIV in North America, Europe or in an urban city in a Central African country. The story teller's tale could be introduced by the town crier and the gongman who would announce the commencement of the tale on radio. It could also be preceded by folk songs that may help set the context for the anticipated health program on radio.

This paper contends that it is not enough for health officials from the department (ministry) of health in the urban centers to read prepared manuscripts on radio to rural dwellers concerning the adoption of modern health and medical practices. It is important that rural dwellers be brought into the radio programs through group discussions led by folk story tellers, town criers and folk singer. In this way, modern media such as the radio could be used as a 'community medium' in which the community participates as planners, producers and performers. The radio rural forum in India, a pilot project between the Indian government and UNESCO was successful partly because the forum programs employed a variety of presentation techniques - group discussions, dialogues, folk drama, folk songs and talks. The discussions helped to foster decisions for adoption of modern information.

The Rural Educational Program of Senegal, first launched in 1968 also used a similar method. Programs were broadcast in the vernacular Wolof under the name 'Dissoi' (dialogue and understanding). It consisted of practical advice on how to improve farming and marketing, and partly of reactions from the villages with answers from responsible officials. In a similar forum, folk singers, folk story tellers, town criers and folk drama can be used on radio to disseminate information on modern health and medical practices.

The findings of Axinn and Axinn on the communication patterns of rural dwellers in Nsukka Igbo community in Nigeria support the argument for disseminating health news to rural dwellers through folk media which lends itself to interpersonal communication. The researchers found that communication among African rural dwellers is on interpersonal level.



They concluded that rural dwellers devote more time to listening to one another than attending to mass mediated communication.

Other folk forms of communication such as festivals, fairs and puppetry must be recognized as effective channels for communication health and medical news to rural dwellers. For example, a health project aimed at enlightening a rural community about breast cancer and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) will succeed better if it is carried out at a puberty festival. Information about STDs, family planning, contraceptives etc. would be more effectively communicated during puberty festivals such as the *ÌEjiji* festival among the Ikwerres in Southeastern Nigeria.

Likewise, a health program aimed at enlightening a rural community about environmental protection of the water ways would be more successful for instance, during a fishing festival such as the *ÌArgungu* fishing festival in Northern Nigeria which dates back to the 16th century. Many fishing communities in Africa use chemicals and dynamites to increase the day's catch. Unfortunately, however, chemicals and dynamites do not only kill the big fishes. They also destroy the younger fishes, crustaceans and other sea organisms that help in the maintenance of the ecological balance of aquatic areas. Beyond that, the explosion of dynamites also pollutes the rivers, and degrades the environment through the deposition of primary and secondary contaminants. A group discussion on a live radio coverage of the festival, featuring health officials, folk singers, story tellers, town criers, gongmen and drummers will be very effective in enlightening the community on the environmental and health dangers of this fishing practice. These folk forms of communication must be recognized as *community media* because rural dwellers depend on them for information and education. They should be integrated with modern media, particularly radio, in communication health and medical news to rural dwellers.

### Conclusion and Discussion

The role of the media in the attitudinal modernity of rural dwellers is unquestionable. However, the process of modernization and development among rural dwellers in Africa has been slow partly because communication policies have almost

entirely not recognized the place of traditional media as effective channels of information dissemination. This paper's main argument is that traditional media should be integrated with modern media for effective communication of health and medical reports to rural dwellers, especially at this time when the deadly HIV threatens the survival of ignorant rural and slum dwellers in Africa.

This contention is supported by Fiofori's findings in an examination of the role of oral narratives in disseminating family planning information in rural parts of Africa. Fiofori concluded that dissemination of development messages in rural Africa can be more effective through traditional communication medium such as oral narrative which he said, are a quotidian part of rural people's experience. The contention of this paper is also supported by the conclusions of Axinn and Axinn whose studies on the communication patterns of rural dwellers in Nsukka Igbo, Nigeria, found that rural dwellers devote more time to listening to one another through folk media than attending to mass mediated communication.

This paper recommends that African communication policy makers should recognize that community media, folk forms of communication can be integrated with modern media to convey modern health and medical reports to rural dwellers. For example, information about a health and medical enlightenment campaign can be written in consultation with folk singers, story tellers and town criers, and delivered as folk songs or folk tales on radio. In the same manner, folk theatrical performance, talking drum and masquerades can be used on radio to convey information about family planning, child abuse, AIDS, safe sex and environmental protection. The *Ìjónu* masquerade, staged during the Christmas and New Year season in Ibo communities of Nigeria, for example, convey socio-economic and political news through an entertainment format. *Ìjónu* is a universally admired and vaunted masquerade among the Ibos not only because of the multifarious colours that adorn its garb but because of the moral values of the songs and information it conveys to listeners. The place of such a form of communication on a radio health program aimed at reaching rural dwellers cannot be overemphasized.

This paper recommends the integration of these folk media with radio because radio is relatively cheap and afford-

able. A set could be as cheap as three (U.S.) dollars. Radio also uses batteries, and it is portable. Therefore, it can be readily available to rural dwellers. This is why this study recommends an integration of traditional and modern media in communication health and medical reports to rural dwellers in Africa.

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**Notes**

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